



“Fatherlessness is the leading cause of declining child well-being in our society. It is also the engine driving our most urgent social problems...Yet, despite its scale and social consequences, fatherlessness is a problem that is frequently ignored or denied.”

David Blankenhorn, Fatherless America

Families are microcosms of society. Strong and stable families contribute to social flourishing, while dysfunctional families push society in the direction of breakdown. More than at any point in history, the family unit is broken as a significant number of children are growing up without a father. In this video, drawing from the research of the American sociologist David Popenoe, we explore how absent fathers are harming children and destroying society, and how this problem can be solved.

“Based on the evidence, a strong case can be made that paternal deprivation, in the form of the physical, economic, and emotional unavailability of fathers to their children, has become the most prevalent form of child maltreatment today...fathers are vanishing from family life and only mothers are left to care about the children. And mothers...are not enough.”

David Popenoe, Families Without Fathers

Approximately 40% of children are born to unmarried mothers. Over 50% of marriages end in divorce, with the mother, more often than not, being granted custody of the children. Even in families where the father is physically present, many are not emotionally present in the lives of the children. Many fathers are addicted to their smartphones, or to drugs or alcohol. Others are forced

to work long hours, or multiple jobs, to provide for their family in the face of the ever-declining purchasing power of money. But whether emotionally or physically absent, the problem of absent fathers has reached endemic proportions and a mother cannot fill a fatherless void. For men and women possess innate biological differences that translate into different, yet complementary, parenting styles. Women are more compassionate and relationship oriented, while men are more competitive, aggressive, and oriented towards risk-taking and self-reliance. Mothers provide children with a nurturing, safe, and emotionally secure environment; while fathers challenge their children, push their boundaries, and help them cultivate autonomy. As psychological health is contingent on adequately satisfying the need for both independence and relatedness, challenge and emotional security, risk taking and safety, a developing child needs to be exposed to both the paternal and maternal worlds, or as Popenoe explains:

“The significance of gender-differentiated parenting undoubtedly is related to something fundamental in the human condition... Parental androgyny is not what children need. Males and females bring different qualities to children... The burden of social science evidence supports the idea that gender-differentiated parenting is important for human development and that the contribution of fathers to childrearing is unique and irreplaceable.”

David Popenoe, Families Without Fathers

Unfortunately, stepfathers are not a reliable solution to the problem of fatherlessness, as stepchildren are often worse off than children of single mothers. The lack of genetic ties can make a stepfather reluctant to invest time, energy, and resources into the child's development, and some stepfathers are prone to seeing their stepchildren as competition for the mother's attention.

“One of the surprising findings of family-related research in recent years is that the presence of stepfathers may actually aggravate childrearing problems and thereby increase the level of negative child outcomes.”

David Popenoe, Families Without Fathers

In two of his books, *Families without Fathers* and *The War over the Family*, David Popenoe summarizes the abundance of studies which demonstrate that children who grow up without a physically present and emotionally committed biological father are at a greater risk of suffering from emotional, behavioral, and physical health problems. They are less likely to succeed educationally, more likely to be socially impaired, and as adults more prone to dysfunctional relationships. Girls of absent fathers are more likely to become single teen mothers. Boys are more likely to become criminals and moral deviants. This list only scratches the surface of the known negative outcomes of growing up absent a father.

“Indeed, almost anything bad that can happen to a child occurs with much greater frequency to the children of divorce and those who live in single-parent families.”

David Popenoe, Families Without Fathers

Following divorce, the quality and quantity of the time that children spend with their fathers sharply declines. In the book *Divided Families*, Frank Furstenberg and Andrew Cherlin explain that after a few years of a divorce only one in ten children have weekly contact with their fathers, while two thirds have no contact at all. Yet even with divorced fathers who maintain contact, most often it is

sporadic and superficial and of little to no benefit to the child. In other words, while the mother-child bond is a primal bond that is rarely if ever broken, a man's bond to his children is heavily dependent on whether he is still in a relationship with the mother.

“Men tend to view marriage and childrearing as a single package. If their marriage deteriorates, their fathering deteriorates. If they are not married or are divorced, their interest in and sense of responsibility toward children greatly diminish.”

David Popenoe, Families Without Fathers

It is because men tend to view marriage and fatherhood as a single package that virtually every society in history has placed great emphasis on the institution of marriage, the primary function of which is to create socially binding ties which hold a man to his wife, for the benefit of the children. Or as Popenoe writes:

“Men have the capacity to father but also the capacity to stray...so all successful societies have imposed social sanctions on men to encourage their fathering behavior. By far the most important of these sanctions is the institution of marriage, the most universally found social institution of all...”

David Popenoe, Families Without Fathers

Up until the mid-20th century, marriage was held to be a sacred contract between a man and woman that was only broken in the most extreme of situations. Since then, the institution of marriage has rapidly deteriorated. Today many people avoid marriage, and of those who do marry, divorce is the statistical norm.

“...if one were specifically to design a culture and a social system for the express purpose of undercutting marriage and fatherhood and men's contribution to family life, our current society would be close to what would result.”

David Popenoe, Families Without Fathers

The sexual revolution, which commenced in the 1960s, was a major factor in the decline of marriage. Under the guise of sexual liberation, promiscuity was normalized, and with more females willing to engage in low-commitment sexual relations, more men renounced monogamy and marriage in favor of sleeping around. The damage that the sexual revolution inflicted on marriage, fatherhood, and the family, was one of its intended outcomes. In summarizing the ideas of Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse, two of the intellectual drivers of the sexual revolution, Carl Trueman explains:

“Sex focused on procreation and family is the repressive weapon of bourgeois capitalist society. And free love and untrammelled sexual experimentation are a central part of the revolutionary liberation of society...To transform society politically...one must transform society sexually...the sexual mores of late capitalism, focused as they are on the maintenance of monogamy and the patriarchal family, are actually no longer as necessary as they once were.”

Carl Trueman, The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self

A societal-wide deterioration in values has also weakened the institution of marriage. Responsibility and commitment to others have fallen by the wayside and been replaced by a narcissistic obsession with ego-fulfillment. While in the past the main function of marriage was to create an economic and reproductive partnership for the sake of raising healthy children, today marriage is seen almost exclusively as a vehicle for satisfying one's needs and desires, and the myth that romantic love can solve one's problems remains pervasive. When feelings of infatuation or love wane, therefore, or when a partner feels unfulfilled or incomplete, then divorce – even when children are involved – has become the socially approved solution. Or as Popenoe writes:

“...it was not so long ago that the divorce revolution was given a strangely positive cast in popular culture. If breaking up is better for parents, it was thought, it cannot be all that bad for children. What keeps parents happy should also keep children happy. How can an idea so wrongheaded have been so pervasive? In part, of course, it was a convenient, guilt-retarding rationalization for parents who were breaking up.”

David Popenoe, Families Without Fathers

Clearly, an abusive or highly dysfunctional marriage should end for the sake of all involved. However, for the problem of the absent father to be solved there needs to be a revitalization in the institution of marriage and a reemphasis on the fact that the main reason marriage developed in the first place was to benefit children, not to fulfill or complete the adult partners.

“Society, in its wisdom, has recognized that in order to hold the father to the mother and child a cultural tie had to be developed where a biological tie was weak....[marriage] is society's way of signaling to would-be parents of children that their long-term relationship together is socially important.”

David Popenoe, Families Without Fathers

While marriage benefits children, committed fatherhood promotes the well-being and fulfillment of men. Family life motivates men to positively channel their aggressive energy, become socially productive, and cultivate the virtues of honesty, trust, self-sacrifice, and discipline, that are necessary to support, and become a role model for, their children. In his book *A Sense of Well-Being*, the psychologist Angus Campbell notes that in terms of overall life satisfaction the most well-off males are fathers of grown children who are still married to their wives. The unhappiest, on the other hand, are divorced men and unattached men who have no wife or children. As men have more difficulty forming social relationships than women, a man without a wife and children is often a man without any close relationships at all.

“It is not just that particularly healthy and competent and morally upright persons are more likely to marry, but that marriage actually promotes health, competence, virtue, and personal well-being...There is a civilizing effect for men in merely being in the company of women and children, an environment which typically promotes life-enhancing values...With the continued growth of fatherlessness...we can expect to see a nation of men who are at worst morally out of control and at best unhappy, unhealthy, and unfulfilled.”

David Popenoe, Families Without Fathers

But it is children who suffer the most from an absent father, and as children are the future of society, society suffers by extension. Absent fathers translate into broken children, and broken children are at risk of growing up to be broken men and women who perpetuate societal dysfunction.

“What society does to its children, so will its children do to society.”

Cicero, De Officiis

And so as Popenoe concludes:

“...strong families with involved fathers in life-long marriages are irreplaceable for a strong and stable moral order, for adult well being, and ultimately for the well being and success in life of their children....If we continue down the path of fatherlessness, we are headed for social disaster...In the final analysis, every father counts.”

David Popenoe, Families Without Fathers